

Save the Old Opera House

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SAVE THE OLD OPERA HOUSE

By Lida L. Greene

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Every town had one. It was likely to be on the second floor above the largest grocery, a shabbily elegant place with plaster scrolls in the ceiling and acetylene footlights curving in front of the proscenium. It was the Opera House.

The House was blistering in summer. Memorial Day exercises brought out palm leaf fans and sweltering adults. The winter Lyceum lectures, as like as not, had to be moved to the school or one of the churches because the room didn't heat well in zero weather. But in between, when the juniors or seniors had a class play or traveling show people came by with *Ten Nights in a Bar Room*, it was breath-taking magic; it was the thousand Arabian nights rolled into one.

I remembered the Opera House when I saw a clipping; it was about an old town hall wrecked by time and vandals . . . plaster on the floor, stage curtains torn and dirty. The hall was being torn down.

The Opera House I knew had a front canvas and two backdrops, purchased, undoubtedly, by local businessmen who wanted to prove their town was as up and coming as the next one. Before the play you sat on the edge of your chair, reading and re-reading the advertisements on the curtain. *Munsinger's Meat Market . . . We Do Our Own Butchering. Smeadley's Drug and Confectionery . . . Fine Candies, Ice Cream, Cigars.* Around and around you read until the *eye* appeared at the peep hole in the curtain. You watched the *eye*, your throat tightening, your heart pounding. And then the canvas would begin to lift, shuddering a little . . .

The Opera Houses are gone, along with the Old Met in New York; along with the German singing societies of Davenport, the Welsh choristers of dead mining camps, the Chase-Lister shows spreading out from Newton, the Princess Theater

in Des Moines. People still talk about the years Faye Baintor and Ralph Bellamy played the old Princess . . .

Please believe me when I say this is no simple venture into nostalgia. If the purpose of the theatre is to stimulate the imagination, to hold a mirror to man for the purpose of increased self-knowledge, then it is important for Iowans to recall the growth and development of the theatre in the state. L. K. Boutin, godfather of the present community theatre movement in Iowa, agrees with me. He has promised assistance in the collection of pictures, programs, scripts and clippings of entertainment events. Both of us need your help. Before you dismiss this from your mind, try to remember where you put those old *flyers* you found among the scrap-books your mother saved. You might even turn off the television long enough to set down your own reactions to the day Chautauqua brought *The Passing of the Third Floor Back* to the tent in the park.

There were two backdrops, remember. The forest glade scene was considered good for children's programs where small girls in red, white and blue sashes performed patriotic drills. Drama, of course, demanded the *interior*. It was drab, with chocolate painted wainscoating and a canvas door that billowed with the effort of being opened. It was used for the death scene of Little Eva. It was the saloon for *Ten Nights in the Bar Room*. What they used for *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and 'Liza's flight across the ice, I cannot remember. It doesn't matter, really. All summer long we played at Little Eva and Topsyie and 'Liza. Life was never the same after you had entered into the marvels and mysteries beyond the proscenium. . . .

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